

“Whole-Souled”

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169 years ago today, Mother Theresa Hackelmeier arrived in Oldenburg, and our Community was founded. It seems that 169 years is not so long ago in the greater scheme of things. But when I put this date into a historical setting, I realized that in 1851 there were only 31 States in the Union. The CA gold rush was drawing people to the West; Isaac Singer invented the sewing machine; and Sojourner Truth gave her famous speech, “Ain’t I a woman?” at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, OH. Mother Theresa was indeed coming into a country where many changes were happening, and she would become part of those changes.

When I try to imagine her journey to Oldenburg, her first days here and the challenges she faced, one thing that comes to mind is the absence of elders. At 24, she begins life in a new culture, with three young women looking to her to help them learn about religious life. She had no older women religious to whom she could turn for wisdom, advice, or comfort. Of course, she had Fr. Rudolph’s guidance, but when it came to discerning the shape of religious life for women in this new place, she must have longed for conversation with more experienced Sisters. Surely some of the patterns of life in her European community did not fit well here, and she would have to discover new ways.

One line in particular from today’s first reading seems to speak to Mother Theresa’s new beginning: **“The way we know that Jesus remains in us is from the Spirit whom he gave us.”** Mother Theresa must have had moments of confusion and doubt about her new life here. Her confidence in the Spirit of God within her must have been tried again and again. We know precious little about her, but her decisions indicate that she was a woman of great trust. One of those decisions was to create a lifestyle grounded in prayer. Even in the busyness of that first year, when they were learning about religious life, starting gardens, and being trained to teach, she made sure that each Sister had an hour of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament each day. As I was re-reading the first chapters of the Poverello, I found myself pausing over S. Laverne’s choice of words.

She described Mother Theresa as giving **“whole-souled” service** to her new Community.

“Whole-souled” implies that she held nothing back. The one thing that would have supported her in this full and generous life was her own prayer, her opening herself daily to receive of the abundance of God’s love and energy. How else could she have ever realized what the Spirit within her urged her to become? How else could those first companions have found within themselves the desire and grace to join her in this life? She modeled for them and for us what it was to trust the work of the Spirit.

We know that Mother Theresa arrived in Oldenburg on the feast of the Epiphany, and we frequently refer to the imagery of following the star. Today's gospel takes us one step beyond that. As Jesus begins his public ministry, Mt is quick to tell us that it is in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light." Mt is highlighting the fact that through his own times of intense prayer, Jesus realizes that he is called to be the light. Later in this same gospel Jesus tells his disciples, "You are the light of the world.... Let your light shine."

It is prayer that helps us believe that those words are also for us. We are called to be light for the world — lights of hope and of compassion; lights of tenderness and healing attention to the needs of others; lights of mercy and of generosity. Although it is a dangerous thing to suggest what someone else might say to us, I am going to do just that. I think that in her own way, Mother Theresa would say to us at this point in our history:

"You are part of a long line of faithful women. Each one of them had her gifts and her hesitations, her doubts and her breakthroughs into deeper faith.

Trust the light of the Spirit within you. Be the light for others. Take the time to immerse yourselves in prayer — so that you are more able to believe that the divine source of this light will never fade.

Help each other to recognize and trust in the Spirit within when it becomes difficult to feel it. You are not alone. You are always led and enlivened by the light of the Spirit. "